

“Reasons”

Music and Lyric by Elizabeth Alexander

Composer’s Introductory Words at Premiere Performance
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Reasons is a song about slavery, but it is not a song about American slavery. Although my initial interest in slavery grew from my childhood in the Carolinas, my family background, and my fathers’ own interest in the Civil War, I soon discovered that I could not hope to understand the nature of slavery if I limited my research to the Antebellum South. Slavery has been with us since the beginning of recorded time; sometimes it seems like only the names and places have changed:

In centuries past slavery flourished on sugar plantations in Brazil, rubber plantations in the Belgian Congo, farms in pre-Industrial Europe, and the brothels of ancient Rome. Whereas today, slavery can be found on sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic, rubber plantations in Liberia, farms in Florida, and the brothels of Thailand — indeed in brothels all over the world.

In New York City, ownership of child beggars in the late 1800s has given way to ownership of sweatshop workers today.

In Columbia, slaves grow flowers, in India they weave carpets, and in the Ivory Coast they grow 40% of the chocolate in the world.

Of course, most of them are not *called* slaves. They are called guest workers, indentured servants, quota workers, migrant labor and apprentices. But these seductive synonyms for slavery are about as convincing as calling layoffs “corporate downsizing.”

Our own participation in slavery is complicated now, and often hidden from us. To the extent that we buy countless consumer goods, including clothing, sugar, chocolate, orange juice, handicrafts and automobile tires, we enjoy the fruits of slavery, which are, first and foremost, low prices. To the extent that we resist passing laws requiring documentation of the source of consumer goods — and that proposed legislation is out there — we turn our heads and allow slavery to continue. While experts disagree about exactly how many slaves exist today — 27 million is a common estimate — they all agree that there are more slaves now than there have ever been, at any time.

Okay, here’s where the shame and blame start to come forward — which is a natural tendency for compassionate human beings — but let’s not go there. It’s not that shame and blame aren’t warranted; it’s just that they don’t help our understanding of slavery, or help the situation itself.

Instead, I tried to approach the composition of *Reasons* with as much curiosity as I could muster, with the desire to really *get at* what drives humans to control other people in such an extreme way. Why do we seem to want more and more stuff, more and more security, more and more leisure? Why do we let low prices drive so many of our decisions? Why does the human race continually fail to live up to its own cherished ideals?

Over time, I've come to believe that slavery occurs simply because we ARE human. The tendencies and temptations which make slavery possible are rooted, sadly but truly, in the depths of every person's heart. An honest understanding of the reasons for the perpetuation of slavery comes not from finger-pointing, but from the willingness to see that the best and worst qualities we observe in ourselves and those we love sometimes do lead down a dark path that can end in human abuse.

For me, the most powerful lyrics in *Reasons* reflect those qualities which I recognize in myself — “the allure of order,” “the pride of ownership,” the persistent perception of greener grass,” “high hopes,” “slippery slopes,” and my own longings for chocolate and a neat and tidy house. If I'm at all honest, I know I've taken convenient shortcuts in my life which fell far short of my own ethical convictions. If I can understand these desires and shortcomings in myself, and begin to see them with compassion — if I can say “Ah, this is part of what my species struggles with” — then I maybe can arrive at a place where healing and change can start to happen.

How audacious — the notion that by singing honest and compassionate songs together, we participate in a radical act of love. Not a *blind* love, but a love that is open-eyed and challenging. A love which can, every once in a while, change the course of history. This is the audacity with which I wrote this song, the audacity which leads singers to sing their most powerful songs, day after day, again and again.